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The monthly newsletter for Smaller Learning Communities Program grantees

This Month's Feature
Creating a College-Going Culture

Why is college important?

There is a new vision of what it means for a high school senior to be prepared for life after high school. The separation between career/technical and college tracks has crumbled as the 21st century realities of globalization and the "knowledge economy" bring the world of work and higher education closer together.

Earning a family wage without some further education or training beyond high school is getting more and more difficult. Learning drives earning: an associate's degree generally provides workers with an earnings boost of about 20 to 30 percent over a high school diploma, while workers with a bachelor's degree earn approximately 40 percent more than those with just a high school diploma. The earnings premium for workers who do not earn a degree but complete at least a year's worth of courses beyond high school is between 5 and 11 percent (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2003). A college diploma reduces the chance of being unemployed by half (College Board, 2006). Even access to health care is affected: 90 percent of college graduates have employer-provided health care benefits, while only 77 percent of high school graduates do (Hoffman, Vargas, Venezia, & Miller, 2007).

Increasingly, a postsecondary credential is a necessity for the many, not a luxury for the few. Knowledge economy jobs call for sophisticated technical, critical thinking, and communication skills. "An eighteen-year-old who is not college-ready today has effectively been sentenced to a lifetime of marginal employment and second-class citizenship. The realities of today's economy demand not only a new set of skills but also that they be acquired by all students," states Tony Wagner of the Change Leadership Group at Harvard University (Wagner, et al., 2006).

What are the barriers to college?

Despite the advantages of postsecondary education, and the fact that 80 percent of students say they want to attend college, approximately 30 to 40 percent of high school seniors fail to enroll in a postsecondary institution for the fall after their graduation (Roderick, 2006; Planty, et al., 2007). Without the rigorous courses that would have prepared them, students find it difficult to be admitted to or complete college. However, students—particularly first-generation college students—face other barriers. Students may not know what steps they need to take in high school to attend college, such as preparing for entrance exams, completing applications, or applying for financial assistance (Schneider, 2007).

A supportive school culture can make a genuine difference in giving students a realistic chance of enrolling in postsecondary education. High schools with a college-going culture reinforce the importance of postsecondary education, provide accurate college orientation, advise students to take rigorous courses, and help students create a clear plan to realize their goals (Pathways to College Network, 2004).

What does a college-going culture look like?

"If college-going is the goal, it needs to be explicitly stated, and all activities will revolve around that," says Gerry House, president and CEO of Institute for Student Achievement "You make it clear with students and parents that all students will be prepared for college. This is what this school is all about" (G. House, personal communication, December 14, 2007).

In a high school with a strong college-going culture, all adults send a consistent message that postsecondary education is an expected and attainable goal for all students. College awareness and counseling responsibilities are distributed among the entire staff. Students, parents, teachers, and school personnel build an intellectual climate in which rigorous thinking and challenging courses are the norm. Students talk about college and support the aspirations of their peers (Schneider, 2007). Academic tracks that do not prepare students for postsecondary education are eliminated and replaced with a rigorous sequence of courses (Conley, 2007). Career academies prepare students to meet college entrance requirements and expose them to a broad range of occupations (Career Academy National Standards of Practice, 2004).

Targeted activities permeate each grade level and build students' awareness of the full range of postsecondary options. Many organizations—including Pathways to College Network, High Schools that Work (HSTW), and Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID)—advocate for some or all of these elements:

- Course advisement guides students to a college-preparatory sequence of courses. A rigorous high school curriculum is the greatest predictor of college completion, regardless of socioeconomic status or race (College Board, 2006).
- Clear communication about the steps necessary to get to college. Students may fill out college applications as early as ninth grade so that they know what elements are involved.
- Explicit plans that scaffold students from secondary school to college and career. These plans address students' "unaligned ambitions." Although students want to attend college, they may not have a good sense of the educational requirements of particular careers and may base their career plans more on the media than reality. First-generation students, for example, tend to have lower educational aspirations than non-first-generation students (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000; Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007).
- Orientation to postsecondary options in the local area and beyond for students and parents that focuses on the differences among postsecondary institutions in terms of academic strengths, qualifications, cost, and future options.
- Awareness of, preparation for, and affordable access to college entrance exams such as ACT and SAT help all students achieve on these important gate-keeping

tests. Illinois, Colorado, Michigan, and Maine require at least one of these tests for all students (Dounay, 2006).

- Accurate information about student financial aid and support in completing paperwork help facilitate paying for college. This may include financial aid workshops presented in parents' home languages.
- Relationships with local colleges facilitate postsecondary transitions. At Hillsboro (Oregon) High School, a college fair includes representatives from a half-dozen local colleges and universities who are able to admit students on the spot. Volunteers help parents fill out their Free Application for Federal Student Aid forms. Of the 34 students who attended the first fair, all were accepted to at least one institution (Barton, 2006).
- Parent involvement brings staff and parents together to support students toward shared goals.
- Diagnostic information about college readiness gives students opportunities to address gaps in knowledge and skills with interventions and additional coursework. Tests that closely mirror college entrance examinations, such as the ACT Plan, College Board's PSAT examinations, and state-developed tests in California, Ohio, Illinois, North Carolina, and Kentucky that measure readiness to do college-level work can provide this actionable information (Dounay, 2006).
- Improvements in instruction across the school emphasize critical thinking, differentiation, and active learning, coupled with instruction in specific college success strategies such as organization, note taking, and writing (Conley, 2007).
- Use of the 12th-grade year for transitioning to postsecondary options through senior projects, work experiences, dual credit options, and other highly challenging program offerings (Keller & Bottoms, 2005).

(Allen, Nichols, Tocci, Hochman, & Gross, 2006; California GEAR UP, 2005; Dounay, 2006; Dunham & Frome, 2003; Keller & Bottoms, 2005; Nelson, 2007; WICHE, 2006).

Distributed college counseling and advisement

All adults in a school are active in building a college-going culture. This may mean new roles for both teacher and counselors. Teachers work directly with students and parents for most of the college orientation and counseling activities described above. Their responsibilities may also include monitoring progress, course advisement, and teaching skills for college success. In the Irving (Texas) Independent School District (ISD), some teachers were reluctant to take on these responsibilities, recalls Robin Shrode, of the American Alliance for Innovative Schools and former SLC project director. "Teachers would say, 'We're doing the counselors' job.' I'd tell them, 'There are five counselors and 2,500 students. You do the math. We're not expecting you to be the experts, but you should be having these conversations with students. You're just helping kids realize hopes and dreams and wishes.' Once the teachers started having good experiences with that, it just became, 'This is the culture of what we do here'" (R. Shrode, personal communication, December 14, 2007).

An advisory program can be a key mechanism for delivering college preparation and orientation activities. In Institute for Student Achievement (ISA) schools, counselors and

teachers work together to outline college awareness and orientation activities for each grade level. College orientation activities begin in ninth-grade advisory and are tied to the intellectual, social, and emotional development of students. For example, when advisors take ninth-grade students on college visits, they help students frame their questions about college; gather information from current college students and admissions officers during the visit; and reflect on how the answers relate to their futures.

The role of a teacher-advisor can also include one-on-one course counseling to direct students toward a rigorous sequence of college preparatory classes. High Schools that Work recommends that teacher advisors use at least four advisory sessions to walk students through the scheduling process and make sure that their course selections are closely aligned with their postsecondary goals. HSTW's sample handbook for scheduling provides students and advisors with a framework to review graduation and college enrollment requirements, create a graduation plan and monitor their own progress towards achieving it, and review the programs of study offered in their school and community (Keller & Bottoms, 2005).

Parents can also be engaged in students' goal setting and course selection through parent/student/teacher conferences. In Irving ISD, advisors facilitate student-led conferences each spring. Students discuss their "six-year plan" for both high school and postsecondary schooling with parents and advisors. Goals are informed by data on attitudes and aptitudes from the standardized career inventory that each student fills out. "It was an eye-opener for the parents," says Shrode. "They would say, 'I had no idea my kid was good in this area.'" Students, advisors, and parents discuss college and career goals and then plan course enrollment for the following year based on common high expectations of the student.

In a school with a college-going culture, counselors' jobs also change. They become the coordinators of college orientation activities, professional developers, and expert advisors to teachers. In Smaller Learning Community schools, the structure of interdisciplinary teams may help counselors and teachers work together in these changed capacities. Team members develop close relationships with students and know their aspirations well. Teams work together to create a coherent and rigorous sequence of classes and encourage students to challenge themselves. Counselors can act as fully integrated members of the interdisciplinary team who can be called on to deliver targeted college information and help students navigate the college application and financing systems, as well as helping the team implement and monitor their college orientation program.

Leadership and professional development

School and district leadership is required to achieve the level of consistency and coordination required for a deep program of college awareness and orientation. Leaders can articulate high expectations for all students to staff, parents, and students. Relationships with local postsecondary institutions can be formed at the school or district level. Teachers and counselors can be supported to take on their new roles. Resources can be allocated to support these activities, including appropriate professional development.

Professional development is an important component in the rollout of any major new initiative. Targeted professional development can address the attitudes, skills, and knowledge that teachers will need to provide high-quality college and course advisement to students. “Do the affective work first,” advises Shrode. “Our belief systems are oftentimes what hold us back.” To help teachers think about their role, some schools present evidence that all students need college preparation and can be successful. They may bring in nontraditional college students to talk to teachers about the factors that helped them overcome barriers to college.

In ISA schools, teacher skills and knowledge are built around what staff members will need to know to facilitate each activity throughout the year. When, for example, advisors are reviewing transcripts with 10th-grade students, professional development might focus on courses required for college admission, interventions to address low grades, and advising students to take more challenging courses. In this way, teachers continually build their knowledge base about college for their students.

All adults in the school have a role to play in creating a college-going culture. When this role is distributed among all the adults, students are given many more opportunities to plan, act, and achieve with postsecondary education in mind. Schools can address both culture and practice through a consistent expectation that all students will go on to college, coupled with opportunities for all students to take rigorous college-preparatory courses that will allow them to achieve their goals.

Resource Spotlight

Free Online Resources on College Awareness and Orientation

Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis, “Cashing in or Cashing out: Tools for Measuring the Effectiveness and Outcomes of Financial Aid Events”
http://www.usc.edu/dept/chepa/pdf/Evaluating_Events_FINAL.pdf
Recommendations for individuals and organizations that seek to provide financial aid information and services to high school students and their families.

FAFSA4caster
http://www.fafsa4caster.ed.gov
An online tool that provides students with an early estimate of their eligibility for federal student financial assistance.

Know How 2 Go
http://www.knowhow2go.org/index.php
Aimed at sixth- through 12th-grade students, this site recommends simple steps that help students prepare for college.

College Is Possible
http://www.acenet.edu/AM/Template.cfm?Section=CIP1

Motivates middle and high school students from underserved communities to seek a college education. Provides links to resources on such topics as paying for college, preparing for college, and choosing the right college.

Pathways to College Network
http://www.pathwaystocollege.net
Publications and an online directory of resources for use in helping middle and high school students and their families plan and prepare for college.

College Navigator
http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/
Tools to help students find the right college, including tips on what students need to do to prepare for education beyond high school, applying for federal student aid, and deciding on a career.

Student Aid on the Web
http://studentaid.ed.gov/
Free information from the U.S. Department of Education on preparing for and funding education beyond high school. Includes tools and resources for students and parents applying for federal student aid.

U.S. Department of Labor Occupational Outlook Handbook
http://www.bls.gov/oco/home.htm
For hundreds of different types of jobs, the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* provides information on the training and education needed, earnings, expected job prospects, what workers do on the job, and working conditions. Also gives job search tips, links to information about the job market in each state, and more.

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